SHARING THE MANAGEMENT OF LEARNING

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Abstract

Language educators ought not turn a blind eye to the multitude of online class management resources available to them—resources which have become extremely powerful, functional and accessible. For teachers without access to any established in-house course management system (CMS), good stand-in systems are readily available on the World Wide Web. Online CMSs offer similar advantages to in-house systems, including (a) effective methods of communicating and sharing with students, (b) efficient means of disseminating homework assignments or tasks, (c) sets of convenient tools for maintaining records of grades and attendance, and (d) support for students in the tracking of their own individual progress through learning. Such blended learning environments are here to stay. However, how difficult is it for teachers to put such systems into practice? And how do students react to CMSs? In answer, this paper firstly demonstrates the fundamentals of pre-made online multifunctional grade-books—straightforward systems that educators can freely use to (a) more effectively coordinate classes and courses, (b) communicate with school administrators, fellow co-workers and students, and (c) provide learners with the ability to keep track of, and better manage, their own development in cooperative courses. Secondly, this paper outlines students' favorable experiences with regard to one such free online CMS.

Key words: course management system, grade-book, language, learning, online

1. INTRODUCTION

Computer technology has become integral in learning. More and more, universities are using coordinated online course management systems (CMSs) and blended learning environments (i.e., settings which utilize a combination of traditional teaching materials and digital resources) in organizing and delivering courses and content (Lacina, 2006; McLoughlin & Luca, 2001). Furthermore, CMSs facilitate the practice of continuous assessment—an important and powerful support to learning (Marriot 2009, p.252). CMSs, then, are of enormous—virtually limitless—benefit to education in the present age. As a result, the sound features of CMSs must be identified and (where appropriate) purpose-built CMSs ought to be designed and implemented within learning institutions.

2. PURPOSE

The goal of this research project is to ascertain the most beneficial attributes of online CMSs—those features of real practical value relating to day-to-day classroom management, teaching and learning. As a preliminary study, heavily review-based, this project strives to better understand such systems along with students' reactions to them. As CMSs are currently not offered at many universities (including Saitama University), the findings derived from this review project are to be used as a means to begin the process of generating a knowledge base for (a) selecting suitable ready-made systems for immediate use in schools and universities, and (b) creating tailor-made CMSs individualized to the needs of specific universities, schools and learning situations.

3. RESEARCH PROCESS

The author examined a number of existing online CMSs before deciding on the most appropriate systems and features to emulate at Saitama University.

3.1 Systems cast aside

In brief, standing as representative examples, the systems that were examined and rejected are as follows:

- Blackboard (blackboard.com), Edline (edline.com), and SchoolFusion (schoolfusion.com): These are comprehensive course management systems, designed for the K-12 market but also suitable for higher education and corporate users. Blackboard, Edline and SchoolFusion provide web-space for course materials, online tests and quizzes. They offer digital submission of assignments, online grade-books, online collaboration within courses, online discussions and chat, and even virtual classroom potentialities. These are excellent systems, but intricate, expensive and often crowded with (at times unnecessary) features.
- Moodle 1.9 (moodle.com): This is an open source (and free) system (unlike the above

CMSs). It demands a relatively high degree of technical skill for set-up and design, and requires substantial time for a user to develop a site. While using Moodle itself is free, there are costs associated with hosting Moodle on a server—the greater the storage space and bandwidth required, the higher the cost.

3.2 Systems determined suitable

Taking the above (negative) factors into consideration, the author continued to search for and appraise CMSs. The following multifunctional grade-books were found to well match predicted teacher and student need (particularly with regard to instruction at Saitama University):

- SnapGrades (snapgrades.com) and Engrade (engrade.com): These CMSs comprise a collection of must-have web-based tools that have been tailored to educational environments. These online multifunctional grade-books offer security and, equally importantly, simplicity regarding use and maintenance—points critical to the success of any CMS (Al-Jarf 2005).

4. FINDINGS: THE ESSENTIAL COMPONENTS OF A CMS

Listed below are important tools and essential components as exemplified by SnapGrades and Engrade—features crucial to the utility and viability of CMSs.

4.1 Online grade-book

These sites offer users a web-enabled, up-to-date grade-book that both teachers and students can access securely and privately. Teachers can customize their grading scales to suit their requirements, including weighting assessment categories. As with a typical spreadsheet, teachers can point-and-click to enter scores, and the grade-books will automatically make calculations. Some of the many convenient functions of these grade-books include: (a) the

ability to remove the lowest assignment score in a category for any student; (b) the capacity to either excuse a student from an assigned task or give extra credit; (c) the freedom to customize the order in which students and assignments are sorted and displayed; (d) the option to print individual student reports; and (e) the flexibility to export data to a spreadsheet program which can serve as an additional backup record.

4.2 Attendance logbook

SnapGrades and Engrade offer an attendance register. With a simple click of the mouse the attendance logbook allows teachers to see attendance-related totals for a student. Furthermore, the attendance logbook allows for the printing and exporting of reports—as well as instantaneous, private online access to all recorded information for respective students.

4.3 Teacher homepages

Teachers each receive a customizable homepage upon which they may display personal profiles, pictures and messages. Importantly, the homepage can display a class calendar—clearly presenting reminders and due dates. In addition, the calendars provide the convenience for teachers to attach files and worksheets that students can download anywhere and anytime. Thus, the calendar provides a suitable location for teachers to post homework tasks, even examinations.

4.4 Shielded messaging

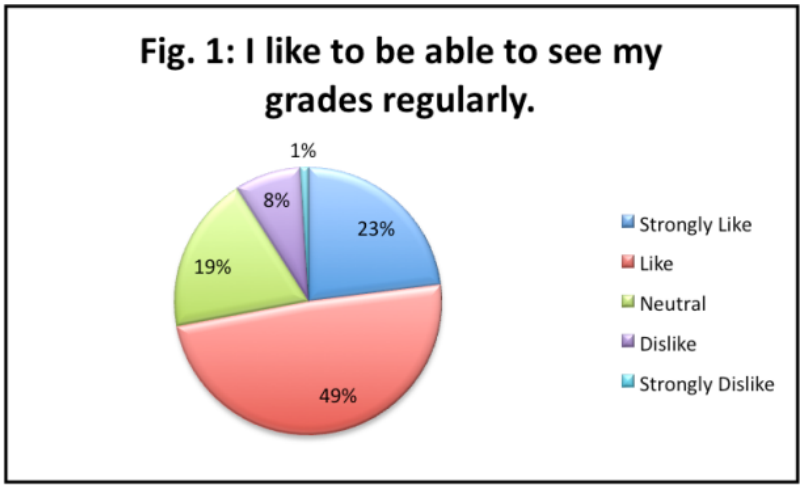
E-mail functionality is provided. The messaging systems are safe as users may message only other users with whom a pre-confirmed in-system relationship exists—such as students to their teacher. Consequently, there are no problems associated with spam or unsolicited material.

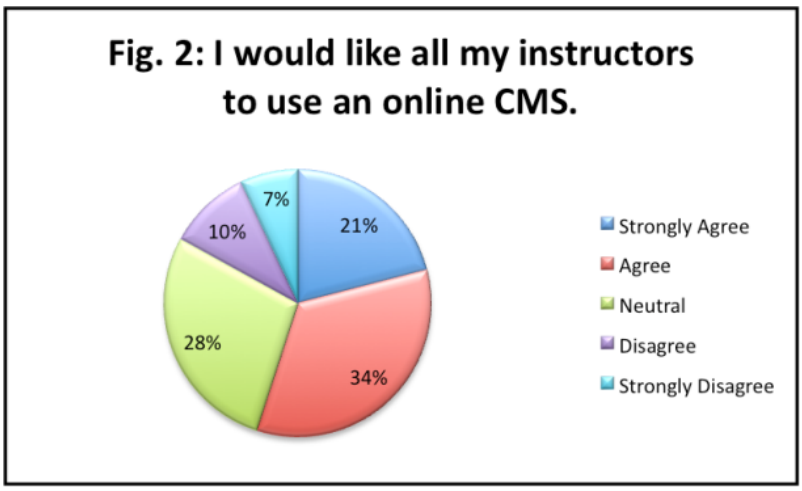
4.5 Course administration

School-related policies and announcements can be disseminated online. Administrators are also able to: (a) securely message individual teachers or students; (b) add, remove or edit class rosters in a teacher's account; and, (c) view and modify records in any teacher's class. In addition, managers can customize their school's public profile, homepage and image for promotional purposes.

5. THE STUDENT PERSPECTIVE

When using any form of educational technology it is important to consider the opinions of the primary users: the learners. Keeping this in mind, a short English-Japanese questionnaire was administered at Saitama University to obtain students' opinions about using such CMSs. A total of 96 students participated in the data-gathering process, being predominantly first- and second-year students spread across a range of majors and courses of study. The survey consisted of Likert-scale questions combined with comment sections (please refer to Appendix A for the complete questionnaire). In particular, responses to two items stood out, as shown in Figure 1 (below) and Figure 2 (overleaf).





In sum, SnapGrades and Engrade embody easy-to-use and convenient online class management tools for communication, for the maintenance and dissemination of records, and for the distribution of assessment tasks—points which Al-Jarf (2005) notes are critical to the success of any CMS. The systems employ only the key tools necessary for curriculum implementation (i.e., features are limited to only those essential to the task of course coordination). A majority of the students like to be able to regularly monitor their grades using such systems (Fig. 1). Furthermore, they are positive towards online CMSs on the whole, indicating that they want to have such similar systems in place (Fig. 2).

6. WHAT CAN BE SHARED?

Online CMSs make provisions for all parties to be more closely bound together throughout all the many processes of learning. This is of particular interest concerning the items listed below.

6.1 Grading procedures

Typically, evaluation is left completely to the teacher's discretion, with students knowing little (or even nothing at all) until the course has completed. However, as was mentioned briefly above, continuous assessment in conjunction with effective and timely feedback best enable students to learn and develop (Marriot 2009, p. 252). CMSs provide enormous

potential for evaluative processes *and* multi-way feedback to take place openly (between coordinators, the teaching team and the learners), thus being extremely suitable for the dissemination of dates, raw scores, rankings, and/or comments.

6.2 Course and curriculum implementation

For both students and teachers alike, CMSs allow for the sharing of (a) the requirements of courses, (b) progress through courses, and (c) responses to whole courses. Teachers are able to obtain feedback quickly from students through online messages and forums—tailoring and modifying courses as necessary *during* implementation (rather than following course completion as is typically the case). In addition, with an up-to-date and well-maintained CMS, students can see where they currently sit, what is soon ahead, and they can more swiftly receive confirmations or clarifications as necessary. Importantly, CMSs encourage teachers (and course coordinators) to plan ahead and to remain up-to-date.

6.3 The learning process

CMSs allow for the more equal sharing of responsibility for learning between teachers and students. Particularly, CMSs encourage students to track their own progress and to be more responsible for managing their own learning.

7. CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

It is important to remember that decisions made in educational environments each day are all based on evidence of some kind or other (Airasian, 1991). The probability of making the most apt choice in any given situation depends not only upon the ability and experience of the decision maker(s), but also upon the quality and relevance of the information on hand (Bachman, 1990). An online multifunctional grade-book provides round-the-clock opportunities and incentives for educators, administrators and students alike to make the most

knowledgeable, informed choices that are possible about teaching and learning.

Therefore, following the examination of key attributes and merits of CMSs outlined in this preliminary research project, the feasibility of implementing a purpose-built CMS for any learning institution ought to be seriously considered—designed and tailored to best serve the particular teaching and learning needs of staff and students. Such an online environment would provide a set of tools for teachers and students to better manage the processes of instruction and study. With regard to the minimum features that ought to be included, an online grade-book and calendar would be essential (providing students with the ability to check grades and receive class information and reminders). In addition, teachers and students ought to be able to interact online through messaging and though the submission of video-, audio- and text-based media. Once such basic functions are in place, future developments ought to include the provision of online space for students to display a portfolio of work—comprising representative examples of written assignments, video presentations, audio excerpts and so on. Such a portfolio of work ought to be of interest to prospective employers, and this would have the additional benefit of motivating students to create high-quality work for public display.

In utilizing an online CMS, teachers and school administrators have crucial data immediately at hand with which they can (a) more competently evaluate, make decisions and manage courses as well as (b) more efficiently communicate with each other and with their classes. At the same time, an online CMS provides students with up-to-the-minute individualized information and feedback regarding course requirements and class progression. Such a system would be beneficial school-wide, especially for those departments or centers with a large mixture of full-time and part-time staff members (such as is the case in, for example, the Center for English Education and Development at Saitama University).

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APPENDIX A: THE QUESTIONNAIRE

Engrade Survey

This survey is designed to get your opinions about Engrade, the online system your instructor uses to inform you of your grades and as a way for you to communicate with your instructor.

Please mark your answers from 1 to 5, 1 meaning that you strongly disagree, 5 meaning that you strongly agree with the statement. You may also write comments to clarify your answer.

<strongly disagree----------strongly agree>

1. I like to be able to monitor my grades regularly. 1---------2---------3---------4---------5
   自分の成績を定期的に把握しておきたい。

Comments: _____

_____

2. Engrade is easy to use. 1---------2---------3---------4---------5
   「Engrade」は使いやすい。

Comments: _____

_____

3. The calendar function keeps me informed. 1---------2---------3---------4---------5
   カレンダー機能は授業内容の把握に便利である。

Comments: _____

_____

4. I have easy access to a computer. 1---------2---------3---------4---------5
   (自宅、大学などに)自由に使えるパソコンがある。

Comments: _____

_____

[Continued Overleaf]

<strongly disagree----------strongly agree>

5. My instructor enters the new grades each week. 1---------2---------3---------4---------5
   教員は、毎週成績を入力し、更新している。

Comments: _____

_____

6. I would like my other instructors to use Engrade or something like it. 1---------2---------3---------4---------5
   他の教員にも「Engrade」またはそれに類するシステムを使用してほしい。

Comments: _____

_____

<never----------once a month----------once a week>

7. I check my grades . . . 1----------2----------3----------4----------5
   私は、・・・の頻度で自分の成績をチェックしている。

8. Please write down any other comments you have about Engrade.
   「Engrade」に関する意見・要望などがあれば書いてください。

Other comments: _____

_____

_____

[End Questionnaire]

BIOGRAPHICAL DATA

Nathan Paul Krug has research interests spanning the fields of Conversation Analysis, Discourse Analysis and CALL. Nathan is interested in the development of tasks and approaches which make use of the computer-mediated environment, particularly in terms of guiding students to use language productively, to negotiate meaning, and to extend critical reasoning skills.